

Search and Rescue

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Summary: When Abigail doesn't come back after an evening of adventuring in the mines, it's up to farmer Mia and her less than combat-ready husband Sam to rescue her. Can they brave the dangers of the mines and find their friend? Or will the bats, golems, and slimes best them as well? (Some character-on-monster violence.)

Search and Rescue

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I awoke, as always, to the sound of Marnie's rooster. I got out of bed and opened the curtains. Frost covered the windows, painting them with delicate geometric patterns. Dust motes danced in the early sunlight. Rays of it streamed across the room and onto the bed, lighting up Sam's face. He rolled over, away from the light.

"Uhhhhh," he moaned.

"Mhmm," I agreed, stretching my arms and yawning. But I didn't agree, really. Mornings had been tolerable, even enjoyable, ever since I moved here. I went to bed tired every night, woke up hungry every morning, and loved every moment in between.

There was something... honorable, righteous, satisfying, about a life of manual labor and production. I couldn't imagine ever going back to my soul-sucking career at Joja Corp. This farm, this town, and these people had given me new life.

I rummaged through my dresser quietly, letting Sam have a little more sleep. I pulled on thick pants, socks, a sports bra, a t-shirt and one of Sam's old button-ups. In stocking feet, I tip-toed out of the house. I put on my coat, laced up the muddy boots I kept outside the door, grabbed the egg basket and milking pail, and started on the morning chores.

After the cows and goats had been milked and the eggs gathered, I went back to the house. Sam was awake and in the kitchen, still in his pajama bottoms and an old band t-shirt. He smiled at me.

"Mornin', babe," he said, pushing long blonde hair out of his eyes.

"Mornin' dear." I smiled, stamping snow off my boots. There had been a day I thought I would never see him without three pounds of hair gel in his hair. He was so cute when he was sleepy and unkempt.

"How are the animals?" he asked.

"Fat and happy," I said, setting down the basket of eggs of the counter. "Fried or scrambled?"

"Scrambled," he said. "And guess what?"

"What?"

"I'm cooking pancakes!"

I smiled. "Thanks, love, but I'm not sure that 'microwaving' qualifies as 'cooking.'"

He stuck his tongue out at me. "Mom taught me how to do this the other day when I visited them. Pancakes _from scratch_." He gestured emphatically at the counter top, where a bowl of actual pancake batter sat, next to a box of Bisquick. I didn't think that Bisquick counted as scratch, but it was certainly a step up from the frozen pancake pucks he bought at Joja mart all the time.

"Wow!" I said. "Color me impressed. I can't wait to eat them."

He, apparently, couldn't either, because he undercooked the first half dozen. Learning from his mistakes, he burned the next three. The last two, however, were a perfect golden brown.

After I finished eating, I set down my fork and leaned back in my chair. "Yup. You're going to have to cook me pancakes every morning now."

He laughed. "We'll see."

"We could at least have Abigail and Sebastian over for brunch someday," I suggested. "Isn't Sebastian's birthday coming up soon?"

He nodded and poured more syrup onto his last pancake. "Tomorrow. I was just talking to Abigail about that yesterday at the ice festival. She mentioned trying to find something for him in the mines. What was it?" He waved a fork-full of pancakes around in the air. "One of those frozen tear rocks he likes so much."

My face fell. "Certainly she wasn't going to get it herself?"

He nodded again. "You find those all the time. She'll be fine, right?"

"I hope so. She has been practicing with her sword more lately..." Sam didn't fully understand how dangerous the mines were, and I wasn't overly-inclined to tell him. I didn't want him to worry, especially in the winter when I spent so much time there.

"We should have a birthday brunch tomorrow for Seb," Sam said. "You should tell Abigail to come too while you're at Pierre's today."

"Okay," I said. "Are you still trying to get them to hook up?"

"It's going to happen!" he said. "And then we'll have a couple to hang out with and it will be awesome."

"Such determination! They don't stand a chance. I'll be sure to tell her. You'll invite Sebastian?"

"Yeah, we're going to hang out today."

"Alright. Changing the subject, darling, dearest. My sunlight-haired sweetheart, my helpful and handsome husband."

He squinted at me. He knew I was buttering him up.

My eyes shot over to the counter, which was covered in batter, Bisquick, butter, and eggshells.

His eyes followed mine and his shoulders dropped. "This is why I don't cook." He sighed. "Yeah, I'll clean up."

I kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, love! I'd help out but Pierre's would be closed by the time I got there!"

I packed yesterday's batch of mayonnaise and cheese into Chess's saddlebags, put my shoes and coat back on, and went outside. Saddling Chess took little time at all. My arms had gotten a lot stronger since I moved here almost two years ago, and the little chestnut mare was used to the routine by now.

When we got to Pierre's, I tied her to the hitching post, untied the saddlebag, and slung it over my shoulder. I checked the bulletin board. My jaw dropped open when I saw the only posted bill. Instead of the usual requests for out-of-season items or specific minerals, the ad said

MISSING: ABIGAIL

LAST SEEN YESTERDAY

I burst through the door. Pierre looked up from the counter. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Have you found her?"

He shook his head.

I dumped my load of goods out of the saddlebags and onto the counter. "Pay me for these whenever. I'm going to look for her. Where did you last see her?"

"Caroline said she saw her heading north," he said. He mindlessly counted out the jars of mayonnaise, going through the motions of inspecting each one, but he wasn't really looking at them. "That was yesterday morning. She hasn't been home since."

"Do you mind if I look in her room?" I asked.

"We don't think she ran away," he said, moving to the cheese. I could hear the sadness and worry in his voice. "She didn't take a toothbrush or clothes or anything. Just a little food and her backpack."

"I don't think she'd run away either," I said. "Maybe she just stayed at a friend's house?"

He took off his glasses and started cleaning them with his shirt and shook his head. "We've called everyone. Look in her room if you want."

Abigail's room looked as it always did. Clean, but cluttered. TV and game console in one corner. Guinea pig cage against the wall. I poured some fresh pellets into Dave's empty dish. Abigail definitely hadn't planned on staying away as long as she had. She always fed David.

Pierre and Caroline might have looked in here already, but they didn't know where she kept her sword. I opened the bottom-most drawer of her dresser and dug under the stacks of loosely-folded shirts, where it usually was. Nothing.

That was it, then. There was no more denying it.

Abigail was lost in the mines.

* * *

><p>I kicked Chess into a lope once I left the store and pointed her west, back to the farm. I didn't even tie her when I got to the house. I just jumped off and ran inside. Sam was just finishing up in the kitchen.<p>

"Hey, hon," he started, but his face turned from happiness to worry when he saw mine. "What's wrong?"

"Abigail didn't come home last night. I'm going to go look for her in the mines." I grabbed my sword from its peg by the door. "I'll take enough food to last till tomorrow so don't worry too much if I'm not home tonight, okay?"

He set down the cleaning rag he had in his hands and took off his plastic gloves. "Heck no. I'm going with you."

I stopped in my tracks. Bless my sweet fool of a husband. That was not going to happen. "Sam," I looked him in the eyes, trying to convey how serious I was. "You've never even stepped foot in the mines. Have you ever even held a sword? You can't come."

I saw a fire in his eyes, then, that I hadn't seen before. "You're telling me that one of my best friends is lost in some

monster-infested caves, my wife is going to go look for her, and you want me to stay home and what? Read comic books all day?"

"Sam, Iâ€|"

"If you think I can do that, Mia, you don't know me very well at all. Do you have any idea how much I worry about you just on a normal day?"

My shoulders fell. "I'm sorry, I justâ€|"

He crossed his arms. "I'm going with you."

Where was the boy who couldn't confess to his mother that he had dropped an egg on the kitchen floor? The boy who was scolded for skateboarding in the street? The boy who snuck me into his room and hid me when his mom came in? Who was this man in front of me who was fiery and passionate and protective?

I nodded. "Okay, fine. Bring me your backpack and grab a coat, some sturdier shoes, and my old sword. It's in the chest at the foot of the bed. I'll pack food and torches."

Sam nodded curtly and went into our bedroom.

I grabbed a few handfuls of field snacks, some loaves of bread, and a Tupperware container full of crab cakes left over from last night's dinner.

"Catch," a barefoot and half-dressed Sam said as he tossed me his backpack from the bedroom door. I caught it and shoved half the food and a few torches inside. He had already put a few things in it, but I didn't bother to see what they were. The sooner we got to Abigail the better.

Sam went back into our room. I had half a mind to just leave him: jump on Chess and gallop off to the mountains while he was changing clothes. I was ready for this. I had been living a life of combat and manual labor for almost two years. My hands were covered in callouses, from hoes, axes, and swords. Sam only had callouses from guitar strings. I loved him, but for his sweet attitude and his creative soul and his carefree spirit. This was not the sort of thing he excelled at. By Yoba, why did I say he could come? He was going to slow me down.

I groaned out loud with exasperation as I reached up for a clean water bottle on a high shelf. The mines were too dangerous for Sam. Too dangerous for Abigail, even if she had been practicing more.

As I reached up, my sleeve exposed my wrist. An ugly red scar ran from the back of my hand down my arm, a reminder of the dangers of the mines. A huge cave fly had caught me off guard last fall and grabbed my sword hand with its clawed legs. I had had to pull it to the ground and bash its head in with a rock.

Maybe the mines were too dangerous for me too. I filled our water bottles and shoved them into our packs. I fingered another scar, this one on my ribs, where a stone golem had snuck up behind while I was fighting a slime monster. Maybe backup would be nice to have, for once.

I carried our bags outside. Chess hadn't wandered far. She was nosing through the snow, searching for dry grass underneath. Sam was right behind me. He had put gel in his hair before I came home, so it was its usual spiky self. He was wearing jeans, heavy combat boots I didn't think I'd ever seen him wear before, and a too-big military coat, maybe something his dad had given him. My second-best sword was tied to his belt. I handed him the packs.

"You'll have to carry mine," I said, "so you can hang on to me."

He nodded and took the bags, slinging his onto his shoulders.

We mounted up. Chess laid her ears back when a second human got onto her back, but she was going to have to deal with it. Sam wrapped his arms around my waist and I urged Chess forward. "Here we come, Abigail," I said. "Please be okay."

* * *

><p>We took the shortcut north of the farm to get to the mountains. "Wow," Sam said when we entered the clearing after the wooded path. "I don't come here often in the winter. I forget how beautiful it is."<p>

I looked around with fresh eyes. A blanket of white snow, fresh from the night before, covered the ground. The pines were dusted with it. Sunlight reflected off the white everywhere.

"Yeah," I said. "It is." I slowed Chess from a trot to a walk. She was starting to breathe hard. "Abigail definitely said she was looking for a frozen tear?" I asked.

"Yeah," Sam said. "I remember because I've always laughed at how emo Sebastian is for liking those."

I grinned to myself. I had thought the same thing before. "Well, that means she'll be somewhere past level forty. I've cleared out the old elevator shaft as far as level 55 or 56. She asks me about my adventures down there all the time. I'm sure I've told her where the frozen tears are at some point. We should start at forty and if we don't see indications that she's been there, we'll hit the next elevator level, level 45."

"Sounds good to me," Sam said.

When we arrived at the mine entrance, we dismounted and I took the hobbles out of Chess's saddlebags and fastened them around her front legs, so she couldn't get too far but she could still move enough to graze on any grass she could find under the snow and drink out of the lake.

I took my pack from Sam and shouldered it. "Ready for your first adventure in the mines?" I asked.

"This will actually be my second," Sam said.

"Really? You've never told me about coming here before." I said as we walked through the entrance.

"It was a long time ago," he said.

From the outside, the mines looked more like a natural cave in the side of the mountain. Once going through the door, though, the signs of previous human (and possibly dwarven) occupation were innumerable. A mine cart on the left side of the cavern sat on a track that led to several different parts of the valley, so I'd heard, when it had been working. A tunnel led off to the right, but it had been sealed up for untold years. A ladder straight ahead led down, to the first level of the mines. On the back wall was the elevator shaft, metal gate closed, no elevator in sight.

I slapped myself on the forehead. "I'm an idiot!"

Sam walked up to the shaft and peered down into the darkness below. "Where's the button to recall this thing?"

"There isn't one!" I said. "There's only a lever on the inside that makes it go it up or down. That's the only way to move it, as far as I've found."

Sam bit his lower lip, a habit of his when he was thinking. "Can we just pull on the cable?"

Before I could answer, he leaned over and grabbed the cable in the middle of the shaft and gave it a hard tug. It didn't budge, but his left foot slipped, kicking pebbles into the abyss. Seconds later, they clanked on the metal of the elevator, several floors below. His hands slipped and I could see him starting to lose his balance.

I grabbed his belt and pulled him backwards. "No. No, I don't think so."

He rubbed his hands. "No, I guess not."

"I guess we'll have to go down the old-fashioned way," I said, pointing at the ladder.

"Forty levels? How long will that take?" asked Sam.

"Well, I usually spend a few hours per level, but since I've already cleared out so many rocks, that will cut down on our time a lot. Earthquakes will have covered up some of the ways down, but maybe an average of thirty minutes per level? Twenty if we're lucky?"

"That's still a long time. Why don't we just go down the elevator shaft?"

I gave him a look. "In what elevator?"

He set down his backpack and started rummaging through it. "If there's one thing I've learned from playing Solorian Chronicles with Sebastian, it's to always pack rope." He pulled a huge bundle of green cord out of his bag. "My fighter has been trapped in more pits than I can count."

I raised my eyebrows. That was some impressive foresight. I was so used to taking the elevator in the mines it never even occurred to me

to have a contingency plan. "My hero!" I said. I tied the rope to a sturdy spot in the elevator shaft's frame. I gave it a few tugs and it held. The rope was light, but strong, with large knots tied in it every few feet.

"Where did this come from?" I asked. I pulled my work gloves out of my coat pockets and put them on.

"This was my Dad's pack from military boot camp," Sam said as he pulled a pair of leather gloves out of a backpack pocket. "He left gave it to me before he was deployed two years ago, and he taught me the basics on how to use some of the stuff inside it before he left. This coat was his too, and the boots."

"It's easy to forget you're a military kid," I said.

He shrugged. "I never wanted that life. It's hard on Dad, Mom, and Vincent. I'm glad he taught me what he did, though." He started unrolling the rope and dropped the loose end down the shaft. It echoed off the walls as it bounced against them. "These knots will make it easier to climb. The rope is thin, but strong. The military made it as light as they could while keeping it usable. Support yourself with your feet and hands both. This probably won't take us the full forty floors, but it should shave off some time."

Sam grabbed the rope and swung himself on, hanging on with both hands and feet. He slid his gloved hands down on the rope and then hung on while he lowered himself until his feet rested on the next knot below. He slid his hands back down, and then lowered his body again. A few knots later, he looked up at me. He was about ten feet below me. Lantern light shone off his honey-colored hair. "See babe, it's not too hard," he shouted. "Come on down!"

His voice echoed off the narrow elevator shaft, "Down, down, down!" Then I heard the all-too-familiar screech of a cave bat, and the fluttering of wings coming closer.

"Cover your face!" I shouted to Sam. His eyebrows furrowed, confused. I hurled off my backpack and groped around inside, but I was too slow.

"Ahhh!" he shouted from the elevator shaft. The bat screeched and fluttered. I finally found my slingshot and snatched a pebble off the cavern floor. I knelt by the edge of the shaft and looked down.

The bat was flying around Sam's head, scratching at him with its sharp claws. Sam hung onto the rope with his feet and one elbow, using the other arm to shield his head. I saw blood on his forehead. He must not have covered his face in time.

I put the pebble into the slingshot and took aim. I wasn't used to shooting down at my target. The first shot missed, ricocheting off the elevator shaft's stone walls.

"What are you doing?" shouted Sam.

I gritted my teeth and found another small rock. This one hit home. I heard a thwack as it hit the bat's wing, and the tiny snap of its bone breaking. It grabbed Sam's coat in its feet as it fell. Sam used his free arm and threw the crippled creature down the shaft.

"Are you okay?" I asked as softly as I could.

Sam took a few deep breathes. "Yeah, just a few scratches," he whispered.

"Come up and I'll bandage them for you," I said.

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. Let's keep going."

I put my backpack back on, stuck the slingshot and a few stones in my coat pocket, and started down the rope. It wasn't too hard until I made the mistake of looking down to see my feet. The glow ring I wore on my right hand put off enough light to see for about fifteen feet, so I could see Sam just fine, but after that it was blackness.

I quickly looked back up. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and slid my hands down the rope. Sam's weight was keeping it taut, so I could feel for the next knot. I carefully slid my feet down. My biceps strained against the weight of my body and all my gear. This was definitely going to put my arms to the test.

My feet found the next knot and I started over. It didn't take long to get into the rhythm of it. Slide hands, lower feet, find knot, repeat. It wasn't long before I heard Sam whisper, "What floor is this?"

I looked down. It wasn't as bad this time. The light from the fifth floor flickered through the gate that separated the elevator shaft from the cavern. "Fifth floor." I whispered back. "First one with an elevator entrance. Next is tenth."

"Where are the lights coming from?" he asked as he continued climbing down. His breathing was labored, but he kept going.

"Electric lanterns," I said. "Must be the same power source that powers the elevator. Linus guesses geothermic."

We descended the next five levels in relative silence. When we got to the tenth level, I suggested we take a break. Sam managed to swing over to the gate and pull the handle without falling, praise Yoba. When I climbed down to meet him he grabbed my hand and helped me out of the shaft and into the cavern. We both sat down and did nothing but breathe heavily and take swigs of water for a few minutes.

The tenth floor's cavern was small, and empty except for an empty chest in the middle of the room where I had once found some leather boots, and a ladder leading down to the eleventh floor. There would definitely be monsters on the eleventh floor, but something kept them out of the tenth. Maybe it was the electric lights.

"That climbing is hard work," Sam said.

I nodded and rubbed my biceps. "And we just have to do that three more times to get to level forty."

"That's all?"

I pulled the baggie of field snacks out of my backpack and opened it. I took one and held the bag out to Sam. "Have a snack. It will keep

your energy up."

He grabbed one and took a bite. "Not as bad as I remembered," he said between crunches. "I've never liked these though. My Dad used to make them when we went fishing."

"You don't eat them for the taste," I said, wiping crumbs off my face with the back of my hand. "You eat them because they travel well." I chuckled. "They were one of the first things I learned how to make. Believe it or not, I survived on these for a little while when I first moved in."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Grandpa's house didn't even have a kitchen before Robin added one on. I don't know what he did for food."

"I think he used to have one," Sam said. "After your Grandma died a big tree fell on half the house during a bad storm, he just had that half torn down and only kept the bedroom. I remember playing with Sebastian while Robin was working on it. He probably just ate at the Saloon."

"That's so sad," I said, "to grow food all day and then eat out every night."

"He was as happy as he could have been, I think," Sam said. "He was friends with practically everybody. He used to talk about you, you know?"

>"Really?"<p>

"Yeah. He'd say, 'You ought to meet my granddaughter. She's lovely. Just about your age. I bet you two would be good friends!'"

"Ha! And now we're married. Spot on, Grandpa!" I raised my water bottle in a toast to his memory.

"I think he'd be really proud of you, babe." Sam said.

I smiled. "Thanks."

"I mean it. Look at you. You're a successful farmer, adventurer, and fisherwoman. You've barely been here two years and you're already deeply ingrained in the community. _And _now you're a search-and-rescue team leader! I know I'm proud of you."

I kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, hon. Hopefully that won't be a permanent position, though. Speaking of, we should probably get back to it."

"Yeah, you're right," Sam said. "Will there be more bats or are we past the danger now?"

I laughed grimly. "Oh, honey. The danger's only just beginning."

* * *

><p>About halfway between floors ten and 15, Sam asked in a whisper, "How did you know to tell me to cover my face when the bat attacked?"<p>

Slide hands, lower body, find knot. "They go for the eyes," I said. Slide hands, lower body, find knot. "That's how Marlon lost an eye."

"Oh," Sam said.

Slide hands, lower body, find knot.

We passed the fifteenth floor without stopping. My arms were aching for a break, and I knew Sam's must have been as well, but he passed it without saying a word and my pride wouldn't let me ask for a break either. We rested again at the twentieth floor and ate another snack, and again at the thirtieth. I could tell Sam was exhausted. Sweat dripped from his forehead and bled through his shirt. We had both ditched our coats at the twentieth floor and shoved them into our packs. I was tempted to leave them behind so we didn't have to deal with the weight, but I knew we would need them again after floor forty, where it was permanently freezing. The cuts on his forehead had dried up. He was covered in dirt, and I was sure I was as well.

We ran out of rope at about level 36. Sam dropped a torch and it landed on the elevator below. "Abigail!?" he called out.

No answer.

I tensely listened for bats. Nothing.

"We'll have to go back up to 35," I said, "and go on foot from there. It's way too far to jump."

"Alright," Sam said. "Where is it?"

"It's just above me. There aren't any lights in this section." I climbed back up. My glow ring illuminated the gate above. Once I was level with it, I hooked an elbow around the rope and leaned out, grasping at the handle. I managed to open the gate, and then I pulled myself up one last time with my aching arms, and swung my feet onto the solid floor of the cave. I gave Sam a hand when he climbed up. We both looked around.

We could only see about fifteen feet, thanks to my ring. Sam lit a torch, but it didn't make things much brighter. "There are lots of bats on these levels," I warned Sam quietly. "And stone golems." I unsheathed my sword and held it out in front of me.

"What is a stone golem?" He unsheathed his as well.

"Help me look for the way down," I said and began to search. "A stone golem is a big, black monster thing. They have a stony outer layer that is weak in the armpits and crotch. They mostly attack by swinging their giant fists at you. They're very strong, but kind of slow. Be ready to DUCK! DUCK!"

Green glowing eyes had appeared behind him out of the darkness. Sam ducked just in time. A giant stony fist whooshed through the air where his head had been. Reflexively, I jumped into action. I sank my blade into the golem's right armpit. It shrieked.

Sam, crouched on the ground, jumped up and to the right. He swung his blade at the monster, but it clanged off its stony armor. I pulled down on my sword with both hands, cutting into its flesh, and yanked my blade out.

The golem lifted its left arm up and swung down, its evil glowing eyes fixed on me. _Clank! _The sound of rock on metal echoed off the cavern walls as Sam lifted his sword with both arms, stopping the golem's swing. I saw my moment and moved. While its arm was still lifted and its weak spot exposed, I sidestepped to get into position and then thrust my blade into its torso with all of my strength, burying the blade almost a foot into its side. With a wet gurgle, the light faded from its eyes and it fell to the floor, still.

After I was sure it was dead, I pulled my sword from its side and wiped it on the ground. Sam just stared.

"Holy crap."

"Nice block there, hon," I said. "Thanks for that."

"You just killed that thing! Holy crap!" Sam had dropped his sword and was pacing back and forth.

"Never let go of your sword down here," I said. "You just saw how easily those things can sneak up on you."

He ran his hands through his hair, something he only did when he was really anxious. "Yeah, yeah." He picked up his blade.

"With golems, you have to stab," I said. "Like this." I showed him the motion. "Slashing doesn't work on them. It's good for bats, though."

He gave the air a few good stabs. "Okay, got it."

His eyes were still glazed over with shock, though. "Hey," I said. "Let's rest for a minute." I scoped out the immediate area. It seemed to be clear. I sat down on a rock and patted the spot next to me. Sam sat. Unshouldering my pack, I took out the Tupperware full of crab cakes. I took a few and passed them to Sam. He grabbed a few and ate.

"These are way better than they were last night," he said, reaching for more.

"'Hunger is the best seasoning,' Grandpa always said. I think hard work is a pretty good seasoning, too though," I said.

We pulled out a loaf of bread and ate that, too. "Hey," I said, "you never told me about your first adventure in the mines."

"It was a long time ago," he said. "We were all pretty young. Seb and I were twelve, maybe? And Abigail and Penny were a year younger. Penny's old man had just walked out on them, for good that time, and Abigail got it into her head that an adventure in the mines would cheer her up. Penny didn't want to do it, of course. She was always the sensible one, even as a kid. But we all pressured her into it and long story short, we found a slime on the second level and all ran screaming for the exit." He chuckled to himself. "Between the four of

us there were three scraped knees, two scraped elbows, and a few cuts. But Abigail was the last one up the ladder. She stood there, with a kitchen knife she had stolen from her house, and made sure every one of us was safe before she followed."

"That sounds like her," I said.

"Yeah."

We gazed out into the darkness. Water dripped from a stalactite into a puddle, marking the seconds. I breathed the cool, moist air in deeply. It was amazing how peaceful the caves could feel, even moments after they try to kill you.

"You good to go?" I asked.

"Yeah."

We packed up the rest of the crab cakes and stood to our feet. I flexed my shoulders before putting my pack back on.

"When we all get home, I'm going to sleep for a whole day," I said.

"I'm going to sleep for two," Sam said.

We carefully searched the cavern for the way down, careful not to split up in the darkness. "I think I feel a breeze over here," Sam said after a while, pointing at a medium-sized rock.

"Let me see?" I leaned closer. The faintest of breezes came from a crack in the floor below the rock. "I think you found it. Keep watch while I break it up." I took out my pick axe and swung the rock, trying to find its weak spots. This was work I was used to. Swing, swing, swing, swing _crack! _Two halves of the rock fell to either side, exposing the ladder leading up from the thirty-sixth floor. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. "All right. Let's go."

We killed at least a dozen bats and three more rock golems by the time we found the ladder leading to the fortieth floor. Sam even got the killing blow in on the last golem. Any other day and I would have harvested the bat wings (I was still amazed that people pay for those!) and searched for ores and gems, but today finding Abigail was our first priority.

Sam had a knack for finding the way down. I was impressed. "Here it is!" he said on floor 39, after we dispatched two especially large bats. "Under here."

I didn't even double-check. I looked for the biggest crack in the rock he had pointed out and gave a swing with my pick axe. The rock broke into little chunks, and there it was. The ladder to the fortieth floor.

I sighed with relief. "Remember five hours ago, when this was just the first step in our plan?"

He chuckled. "Has it only been five hours? Floor forty. Check. Now at least the easy part is out of the way."

* * *

><p>The elevator was there.<p>

"Where were you when we needed you, huh?" Sam asked it, jabbing at it with his pointer finger.

The fortieth floor, like the tenth, was small and empty except for a small chest in the center of the room, where I had found my slingshot, and a ladder leading down. Electric lanterns were hung from the walls every ten or twenty feet. Their light was dim, but much better than the natural darkness of the levels we had just come through. The air had a distinct chill. The rock walls were icy to the touch. We both put our coats back on and descended the ladder.

"Abigail!?" I called out, somewhat against my better judgement. I didn't want to disturb any more monsters than necessary.

Nothing but the echo of my own voice.

We split up, spreading out over the cavern. As I stepped around a rock formation, I slipped. I tried to catch myself with my left hand, but it landed in the same slippery slime that my foot had slipped on, and I hit the ground.

"Babe, you okay?" Sam asked, running to me.

"Yeah," I said. "What's one more bruise?" I got up, unsuccessfully trying to brush the bluish slime off my clothes.

"What is that?" Sam wrinkled his nose.

"It _was_ a frost jelly," I said. "Green slimes' cold-loving cousins." I flicked a chunk of it off my arm. "Older than an hour, fresher than a day or two. This stuff stings like the dickens while they're still alive. Abigail must have killed it yesterday."

We continued searching for the way down. We found more evidence of Abigail's conquest: a few dead bats, some more slime puddles, and spots of black coal dust, where she killed dust sprites. Finally I found the ladder. "Sam, over here!"

We descended the ladder to the next level. We were in the middle of a tunnel that led off in two directions. "Abigail?!" called Sam.

Only echoes. "Abigail?! Abigail? Abigail!"

And then, faintly, another voice. "Hello? Hello? Hello!"

"Abigail!" I yelled.

"I'm over here!"

Sam and I each ran in different directions. I skidded to a halt. "I think she was this way?"

"I thought it come from this way?"

"Over here!" she called again, louder. Echoes bounced off every wall.

"You're right, it was that way," Sam said.

"No, now I think it was the other way."

"You go that way and I'll go this way," he said.

I nodded and ran down the tunnel. It turned sharply to the left. I kept my sword ready, in case anything jumped out at me.

"Mia?" I heard Sam yell my name, fear in his voice. "What do you do for really big slimes?"

"_Crap._" I hated those things. "Slash!" I shouted. "And dodge the little ones!"

I sprinted back the way I came. Past the ladder and around a sharp turn I could see a huge cavern a short ways off. At the far end of it, Abigail sat with her legs hugged against her on a large rock formation, about four feet above a huge swarm of giant blue slime balls. There must have been half a dozen of them, all three feet tall and three feet wide. They were moving in their bouncing, squelching way away from Abigail and towards Sam, who stood in the entrance of the room, swinging his sword at the closest giant slime.

He hit it once, twice, a third time. Each time more slime goop stuck to his blade, weighing it down. With a mighty yell, he brought the sword down, slicing the monster in half.

For the briefest of moments, it looked like he had killed it, but then each half of the slime gathered itself together, forming two smaller slimes who attacked him from both sides. He cried out as their acidic, icy forms burned him.

A rage came over me. I ran as fast as I could and swung at the nearest slime with all my might. It dissolved into a puddle of goo just as Sam killed the other small one.

"One down, five to go," Sam said between deep breaths.

The other five were drawing closer.

"That's about four too many," I said.

"What's the game plan?" he asked.

I had no idea. The fastest two slimes were already only a few feet away. Too late for a plan. "Try not to get hit!" I yelled as I swung wildly at the one on the right. My blade struck it, but seemed to do no harm at all. I swung again. The slime pulled back. I knew from experience it wasn't retreating. In a panic, I jumped to the left, dodging just in time to avoid its charge attack, but I landed directly on Sam.

"Crap! Sorry!" While scrambling for my footing, my hand fell on something hard in Sam's coat. "Is that a bomb in your pocket?"

"Is this really the time?" Sam asked, helping me to my feet and

pulling me out of the way just as the second slime charged.

"No," I said. "In your coat pocket!" I slashed at my slime and followed up with a second swing as it reared back, interrupting its charge.

Sam switched his sword to his other hand and reached into his pocket, while slicing at his slime left-handed. He pulled a fist-sized black ball with a fuse out of his coat. "There's a bomb in my pocket! Dad gave me a coat with a bomb in the pocket?!"

By now all five slimes were on our side of the room, away from Abigail. I slashed at the one closest to me again. With a squelch, it divided into four smaller slimes. Sam hit his and it divided into three.

"Run for the rock!" I yelled. Sam and I sprinted away from the sea of slime monsters and scrambled up onto the rock formation with Abigail. There was barely room for all three of us, standing.

"Hey, guys," she said. "Good to see you."

"Hand me the bomb?" I asked Sam. I handed Abigail my sword. Sam placed the bomb into my hand and I took a match out of my pants pocket.

The slimes were reversing direction and heading this way again.

"What's the blast radius on those things?" Sam asked.

"I've only used this kind once. I'm pretty sure we'll be safe over here," I said.

"Pretty sure?" asked Abigail.

I lit the match and held it to the fuse. It sputtered, then took. Yoba help me, I prayed and I threw the bomb. It landed in the middle of the slimes. Time seemed to slow down. The flame inched down the fuse in slow motion.

Red-hot fire blossomed from a single seed as the bomb detonated. The slimes exploded into waves of blue goop as the concussive wave of the explosion hit them. Rocks and dirt flew in all directions. I shielded my face with my arms as pebbles and dirt pelted me. My ears rang from the noise.

>"I think you got them all!" Sam shouted. His voice sounded muffled and far away. "But I think I have hearing damage!"<p>

"What?" Abigail yelled.

We carefully got down from the rock. Abigail walked to the other side of the room, right of the entrance. She leaned over and picked something up out of the pile of slime. It was her sword. She shook some blue goop off of it.

"I've been staring at this thing for hours," she said. "It got stuck in a slime and I ran for the rocks. I've been regretting that forâ€¦ what time is it?"

"I have no idea," I said. "It was late Tuesday afternoon when we left."

"No wonder I'm hungry!" Abigail said. "I had begun seriously considering eating rocks."

Sam and I chuckled.

"I left for the mines just after the Ice Festival on Monday," she said. "I wanted to get Sebastian a birthday present."

"Did you at least find one?" I asked as I rummaged through my backpack for food. I handed her the last of the crab cakes and Sam handed her a loaf of bread.

"Praise Yoba, you're lifesavers." She started shoving crab cakes and bread alternately into her mouth. "And yeah, I did."

She was definitely looking worse for wear. She was covered in dirt and blue goop from combat boots to purple hair. She had scratches on her left cheek and right forearm. Her clothes were ripped and she looked like she was having a hard time standing up.

But she was alive, dang it. She was going to be okay.

The trip out of the mines was uneventful and slow. We were all exhausted, Abigail most of all. We were able to take the elevator up, once we got back to level forty. Abigail couldn't believe how far we had climbed until the rope hit the top of the elevator around floor 36.

Chess was waiting outside the cave when we walked out into the moonlight. She was peacefully munching hay, which someone must have brought her.

"Linus," I said to myself. He was a good guy.

We let Abigail ride Chess and we walked. "Let's stop by Sebastian's before we go to Harvey's clinic," she suggested. "I think it's after midnight, so it's officially his birthday."

"All right," I said, "but after that, straight to the doctor, young lady."

When we got to Sebastian's house, Sam knocked on the basement window. After a few minutes, Sebastian came outside, dressed in a black robe. He looked sleepy and confused. "What are you guys doing out here?" he asked, groggily.

"Happy birthday!" we all said in unison.

Abigail, who had dismounted, handed him something wrapped in a cloth. Sebastian unwrapped it, revealing a tear-shaped, pale blue stone, about the size of his palm. It glistened in the moonlight.

"It's beautiful," he said. "I love it. Thanks, Abigail." He smiled, and Abigail's face lit up. I swear I saw her blush.

"I couldn't have gotten it for you without a little help," she said, gesturing at Sam and me.

Sebastian looked us all up and down. "Were you all in the mines? You guys are filthy. I can't believe you went, Sam! Did you have to hold his hand the whole way?" he asked me.

"Sam was a terrific companion," I said, looking at him. "I couldn't have done it without him."

Sam smiled and squeezed my hand. "We were going to invite you guys to our house for brunch," he said to Sebastian and Abigail, "but I think I'm going to sleep for about twelve hours once I get home, so how does breakfast for dinner sound? I'm making pancakes!"

"Uggh," Abigail said.

"No way!" said Sebastian. "Microwaving frozen pancakes doesn't count, man."

"No, I can make them from scratch now, guys, I swear!"

* * *

><p>I woke up that afternoon to Sam opening the curtains. I squinted at the sunlight, disoriented. I sat up and rolled over. My dirty boots sat on the floor beside my bed next to my winter coat and my wadded up work clothes.<p>

"Mornin' babe," Sam said. "Or good afternoon? Evening? It's almost six o'clock. I wanted to let you sleep more but the gang is going to be here at six thirty for brinner. I thought you might want to shower."

I looked at myself in the mirror. "Oh lands, I'm filthy." My hair stuck out in every direction. My face and neck were brown with dirt. Did I still have blue slime goop in my hair? I was just in my sports bra and underwear. I had a vague recollection of falling into bed when we finally got home and passing out immediately.

Sam, on the other hand, was fully dressed and clean, except for a little flour on one cheek. "You're a superhero," I said. "I thought you were just a skateboarder and a musician and a sweetheart but you've been hiding from me that you're also a superhero."

Sam smiled. "Nah. You're the superhero. I've known that all along. You're just rubbing off on me a little." He kissed me on the forehead, dirt and all. "Abigail would probably still be stuck down there if it wasn't for you. You know I couldn't have found her myself, and I don't think anyone else in town could have either."

"Well, I couldn't have done it without you." I couldn't help but smile, ear to ear. Then I frowned. "Do I smell smoke?"

Sam's eyes went wide. "My pancakes!" He ran back to the kitchen.

I laughed. My sweet fool of a husband. I was so blessed.

End
file.